

Speech to the BVA annual Scottish Dinner

Harvey Locke, President of the British Veterinary Association

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~ PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ~

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the British Veterinary Association's annual Scottish dinner. I'm delighted that you could join us here this evening and I'm grateful to our kind host John Scott for again allowing us to enjoy these very impressive surroundings. And on behalf of the BVA I'd like to say congratulations to John who, as most of you will know, has been honoured with the role of Deputy Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament.

I'd also like to thank Cabinet Secretary Richard Lochhead for agreeing once again to speak on behalf of our guests tonight. Having built up our relationship with you in the last Parliament, Richard, we are very pleased to see you back in post and offer our warmest congratulations to you too. We are all looking forward to hearing about your plans for this Parliament and beyond.

But before we do, I would like to outline some of the current issues of concern and interest to the veterinary profession.

As most of you will be aware 2011 has been designated World Veterinary Year in recognition of the 250th anniversary of the first veterinary school in Lyon, France. Although we can't claim the birth of the profession for ourselves in the UK, we can and should be very proud of our history.

At such milestones it is worth pausing and reflecting. Looking back at our achievements and failures and trying to learn from both. The veterinary profession has come a long way since 1761 and in that time has adapted and changed a huge amount.

Vet 2011 is just one reason why I chose 'Vets in a changing world' as the theme for my presidential year.

Politically and economically we are living in the midst of enormous fluctuation.

Although Richard Lochhead has been reappointed as Cabinet Secretary this is a new government with a new mandate and a new set of priorities; priorities that we hope to shape.

In Westminster we have the Coalition Government and the newly-formed Animal Health Veterinary Laboratories Agency (or AHVLA) –new entities that will change the way we work.

In Europe the drafting of the new Animal Health Law offers us opportunities as well as challenges.

The need for cuts across Government perhaps offers us our greatest challenge. The BVA has voiced its concern on a number of occasions that cutting in the wrong places could have devastating consequences. In particular we have referred to funding for surveillance and research.

We welcomed the devolution of the animal health and welfare budget to give the Scottish Government the funds to implement its policies and I was pleased to see the recent commitment to ongoing funding for research. In particular, the £3.5 million awarded in March to forge a strategic partnership in Animal Science Excellence and to provide a Centre of Expertise to advise policy in animal health and welfare.

I don't need to tell anyone here that Scotland's reputation as a world leader in animal health and welfare research is no exaggeration. Indeed the high calibre of Scotland's research institutes was showcased at the BVA's highly successful annual Congress, held in Glasgow last September.

In a changing world that brings new threats it is invaluable to have such expertise at hand. And it is our research and surveillance capacities that are the key to our ability to adapt to that change.

Last year my predecessor Bill Reilly welcomed the announcement of the review of veterinary surveillance, led by John Kinnaird – and I'm delighted that John is here this evening. And it was Bill, along with David Logue, who fed into the review on our behalf.

I understand that the results will soon be published and, as you're considering the report, Cabinet Secretary, I hope these two key messages will resonate: the future of veterinary surveillance must be practitioner-based, and once data is collected it must be put to good use.

The results of the review will feed into the bigger picture. I've already mentioned the Animal Health Law being shaped in Europe and I'm pleased to note the SNP manifesto pledge for a Scottish Animal Health Strategy, which the veterinary profession is keen to feed into as well as the recent announcement that the Government will look at setting up an independent meat inspection body for Scotland.

Another part of that picture will include the Government's response to the Expert Forum report, published in March, which sets out a direction for responsibility and cost sharing in Scotland.

Although the BVA was disappointed that the Forum did not include veterinary expertise, we were pleased to be consulted by the Chairman John Ross, who I'm also delighted to welcome here this evening.

The final recommendation of the report is particularly important: "Contributions made by animal keepers ... should be adjusted to reflect and reward actions they may have taken to reduce the likelihood of disease incursion."

We all have a responsibility to protect our animal and human populations from disease so it is right that a higher cost is borne by those who allow others to take that responsibility more seriously.

It is a principle being applied in the work by the University of Glasgow on risk-based testing for bovine tuberculosis, which, in the future, could see a focus of surveillance efforts for bTB on those herds considered to be of higher risk.

The idea that everyone must do their fair share is also writ large in the programme to eradicate bovine viral diarrhoea (BVD) and the new controls to tackle sheep scab.

And I would just like to say a word about the outgoing CVO Simon Hall. Although Simon has only been in the post for a short while he has had quite an impact and the work on BVD is a good example.

Responding to the BVD eradication plans we told the Government that changing behaviour for BVD would be a challenge. But we strongly welcomed the proposals and the commitment – both financial and political – to tackling this disease head on.

It is clear that the progress to date would not have been possible without strong commitment from industry and I would like to thank industry representatives here this evening and my fellow BVA members for their role, working with farming clients, in rolling out the programme.

Veterinary expertise is at the forefront of both policy making *and* policy delivery.

That is why the role of Official Veterinarians (OVs) is of such importance to the BVA. Last year Bill Reilly outlined our difficulties with Animal Health in finding agreement on a professional fee for a professional service for OVs in England and Wales.

Our dialogue continues with AHVLA and I am hopeful for a workable resolution. I understand that a number of ideas are currently being formulated in Scotland to shape the future relationship between Scottish Government and its OVs.

Cabinet Secretary, if we have learned one thing from the English situation it is that any plans must recognise the professionalism of veterinary surgeons. It is also vital to keep the channels of communication with the profession open throughout any discussions, and we would be pleased to work with you on this.

Another issue raised last year was the worrying number of cases of bovine neonatal pancytopenia (or bleeding calf syndrome).

The recent Defra-funded study carried out by SAC and VLA found a number of risk factors, such as the use of the Pregsure BVD vaccine in the dam, the herd being located in Scotland, the presence of sheep on the farm, and the housing of the calf.

This is useful work which supports the withdrawal of Pregsure from the market. But the underlying causes remain unclear and I would urge veterinary and farming colleagues to continue identifying possible cases quickly so that further research can be carried out.

Whilst mentioning the excellent work of the Scottish Agricultural College I like to offer the BVA's congratulations to Professor Bill McKelvey who has received an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours list. It is a fitting tribute to such a distinguished career.

The increasing movement of people and animals around the globe and our changing climate mean the threat of exotic disease is ever-present. And we need to be prepared.

Our current state of preparedness was tested at the end of last year in the Defra-led Exercise Silver Birch, which played out an FMD outbreak scenario in real time. The BVA was pleased to be invited to take part and ran the exercise live gathering the expertise of our specialist species divisions and feeding into the decision makers.

The exercise raised as many questions as it answered and the publication of the results coincided with the 10th anniversary of the 2001 outbreak; a stark reminder to us all that in this changing world we need to take time to learn from our experiences and our mistakes.

The role of vaccination in an FMD outbreak proved to be one of the key issues and the BVA was delighted to be invited to the excellent seminar held at the Moredun in partnership with the NFUS and Scottish Government.

Summing up the day Julie Fitzpatrick said “We have the tools and technologies to deal with FMDV if we wish to do so – what is missing are the policies and strategies that we would require.”

We all agree that the protocols and strategies for decision-making need to be put in place in peacetime so let’s get on and do it.

When we work together we really do achieve success. The announcement earlier this week that Great Britain is to be declared bluetongue-free is testament to the partnership between vets, farmers and government. In Scotland, particular credit must be given to the compulsory vaccination programme implemented by the Scottish Government in 2008, which ensured Scotland remained free of the virus.

But as one threat subsides another arises with *echinococcus multilocularis* (or EM) and in this case the risk is from the movement of pet animals, not livestock.

You may be aware that the UK’s derogation from the pet travel rules is due to end on December 31st. This derogation allows us to impose stricter controls for rabies, ticks and tapeworms on pets crossing our borders.

The veterinary profession, in its role as guardian of public health, has a particular concern that the removal of tapeworm controls could see the introduction of EM to the UK and Ireland.

Although relatively benign in dogs, the resulting disease in humans – alveolar echinococcosis – is an invasive, cancer-like cystic stage of the parasite, and is invariably fatal if not treated.

Unfortunately, although the science clearly supports the need for the UK and Ireland to maintain the additional controls the decision is in danger of becoming a political football for those groups in Europe concerned with the technicalities of the new legislative regime under the Lisbon Treaty.

We recognise that, in an ideal world, there would be uniformity of regulations throughout the EU, allowing unhindered movement of citizens and trade. However, when it comes to disease control, surely it is sensible to do what we can to prevent spread of disease between regions and Member States rather than waiting until it has spread and then attempting to eliminate it.

Absolute harmonisation in certain circumstances such as this, where we have a fatal zoonotic disease that will become endemic and impossible to eradicate, is not a scientifically sound position to take; any true European will recognise that free and unhindered movement of our citizens throughout the Union does not have to equate to unfettered movement of fatal diseases.

The mantra of both the EU Animal Health Strategy and the OIE is “prevention is better than cure”. This is never more appropriate than in the control of the spread of EM and it is a perfect example of the “One Health” concept in action.

While the decision on EM is clear to us, we must always be ready to change our position if and when new science is presented to us. You will be aware that the BVA holds a firm position against the tail docking of all dogs, unless necessary for therapeutic reasons. Puppies suffer unnecessary pain as a result of docking and are deprived of a vital form of canine expression.

We were pleased when our lobbying, alongside a number of other welfare organisations, secured a complete ban on docking in Scotland. We do not believe that the current evidence for a working dog exemption – as introduced in England and Wales – is robust.

But we accept that legislation must be reviewed from time to time and so we will be involved in the Government's research into tail injuries in working dogs. Any new findings will go back to our members for discussion.

As pure scientists vets might hope that all policy decisions were based on the scientific evidence but as realists we of course understand that many other factors must come into the equation.

And when there is a lack of scientific data that doesn't mean that we cannot take a view.

The use of wild animals in travelling circuses has gained a lot of attention in the media as well as in Holyrood and Westminster.

When the BVA's ethics and welfare group considered the position on this issue it was clear that there isn't a huge amount of published scientific evidence. However, as veterinary professionals we must also make decisions based on our unique experience, knowledge and understanding of animals.

We feel it is emblematic of the way we treat animals. The inability of a travelling circus to meet the five welfare needs of wild animals cannot be justified for public entertainment.

I was delighted to hear the Government's comments on this issue during last week's members debate, and hope to work with you, Cabinet Secretary, to once again place Scotland at the forefront of championing animal welfare.

With only 38 wild animals currently performing in UK circuses it is clear that public attitudes on this issue are changing. We all know that public opinion can be a strong driver of policy change.

Indeed I have no doubt that the public's desire for better animal welfare standards has driven much of the legislation we now take for granted. But we must never forget that the UK enjoys some of the highest standards in the world.

The concept of 'buying British' is one that not only supports UK industry, but also one that says yes to improving animal welfare. The BVA therefore fully supports your call, Cabinet Secretary, for mandatory country of origin labelling. We want to see labelling that covers where the animal was born, reared and slaughtered.

The BVA has also fully supported moves in Europe to introduce compulsory labelling of meat and meat products from slaughter without stunning.

We are disappointed that some of the discussion has centred on issues of religion when a high percentage of Halal meat in the UK *has* been slaughtered using the stunning method.

This issue should be one of consumer choice and the only information consumers require to make a higher-welfare decision is whether or not the animal was pre-stunned.

In an ideal world the BVA would like to see one clear EU-wide label that would give consumers confidence that they were buying products that were produced to high welfare standards.

At the moment, country of origin and slaughter without stunning labelling are the only options on the table. We don't want to miss this opportunity and would urge you to support these measures, which will come back to the European Parliament in early July.

I have talked a lot about changes in disease risks, changes in scientific knowledge and changes in consumer attitudes. But this is World Veterinary Year so I want to end by talking about changes in the veterinary profession.

There have been many discussions about the future (and even current) shortage of vets in the UK, particularly in large animal practice. The Vets and Veterinary Services report by Professor Lowe found no absolute shortfall in farm animal vets but set out a number of challenges for the profession in the future; particularly around the need to adapt to the needs of clients and around the role of the vet leading a team of paraprofessionals.

To address some of these issues and provide leadership for the profession the BVA has set up the Veterinary Development Council and we have been pleased to welcome a Scottish Government representative on to the Council. The work of the Council subgroups is now underway and we look forward to reporting back to you on our progress and findings next year.

At the same time we are looking at the issue of veterinary education and the introduction of hugely increased tuition fees in England.

Veterinary students are already suffering the financial double whammy of longer courses and an inability to work in the holidays due to the compulsory element of Extra Mural Studies (or EMS).

Under the new arrangements graduates from the five English veterinary schools face tuition fee debts of £45,000 to £54,000. Consider that those graduates are likely to earn just half of their human medicine counterparts and it's a very worrying situation.

It is also one that does not bode well for the less well paid, but vitally important, roles within the veterinary profession, including food animal work in remote and rural areas, and research posts.

We were therefore very pleased to hear the First Minister's commitment to keeping education free for Scottish students but it is unclear if this pledge can survive the economic climate. It is a position that, understandably, the universities are struggling to support. The overriding concern for the BVA is that any future policy must support the universities as centres of excellence in research and ensure that veterinary students are not unfairly disadvantaged for their career choice.

And it is an *active* choice. I certainly don't know of anyone that fell into veterinary science!

It is a choice made by those who want to safeguard animal and public health and welfare.

And although the veterinary profession has changed a huge amount in the past 250 years the principles on which it was founded by Charles Bourgelat are still strong today. The commitment to science-based medicine and the concept of One Health – linking animal and human pathology and biology – remain at the heart of the profession in 2011.

And it is this commitment to One Health that we all share here this evening.

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